

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

NESTING AND ROOSTING RECORDS OF PICIFORM BIRDS

Our research on woodpeckers, barbets and honeyguides for *The birds of Africa*, and Short's long experience with woodpeckers prompt us to comment on the habits of piciform birds relative to 'nesting' reports. The literature is replete with casual statements about 'nesting' woodpecker-like birds, and the use of so many nest record schemes in which nesting reports are skimpy also indicates a laxity of rigour in checking such records.

Woodpeckers and barbets not only nest in cavities that they excavate, but they roost in holes that the birds may excavate at any time of year. In woodpeckers the sexes usually roost separately, and each individual is apt to have available one or more potential roosting cavities in addition to that normally occupied. Roosting holes are defended vigorously by the owners, and, indeed, in barbets especially, the roosting cavity is a major centre of activity throughout the year. As for honeyguides, those species that use woodpeckers and barbets as hosts may investigate nesting and roosting cavities of prospective hosts at times other than the breeding season (pers. obs.).

The mere fact that a woodpecker (or barbet) excavates a hole is no indication of its breeding. Likewise, defence of a cavity does not constitute evidence that the cavity is, or will be, a nesting site. We note that some picids carry wood chips from the cavity that they excavate - these could be misinterpreted as the carrying of faecal sacs from their 'young'.

The main way to ascertain nesting in woodpeckers and barbets is to examine the contents of the cavity (a mirror and torch can be used to do this). Otherwise, careful observations of sustained incubation (e.g. frequent changeovers by two or more individuals, often marked by vocal or other displays) and repeated carrying of food into a cavity are good indications of nesting. There can be problems associated with the latter, for a male may courtship-feed its mate inside a nest-to-be, and the young in the nest may be a honeyguide rather than young barbets or woodpeckers!

These remarks are designed to encourage caution and more careful observation in reporting nesting attempts by piciform birds, to give us accurate bases for breeding records.

Lester L. Short, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY 10024 and Jennifer F.M. Horne, National Museums of Kenya, Box 40658, Nairobi